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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MASERU 000160

SIPDIS

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DEPT ALSO FOR AF/S

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [LT](#)

SUBJECT: LESOTHO: OPENING OF PARLIAMENT ENDS WITH SIT-IN, EJECTIONS

REF: A) MASERU 77; B) MASERU 124 AND PREVIOUS

MASERU 00000160 001.2 OF 002

1. SUMMARY: After His Majesty King Letsie III officially opened the 7th Parliament of Lesotho on Thursday, March 15, Lesotho's major opposition parties staged a "sit-in," and pledged not to leave the Parliament building until the government had addressed their demands for a redistribution of legislative seats. Later in the evening, security officials, including members of the Lesotho Defense Forces (LDF), forcibly ejected the opposition parliamentarians. Opposition party leaders have called for a three-day work stoppage from March 19-21 if the GOL does not meet their demands. This situation represents an escalation of the opposition's tactics in pressing their complaints concerning the February 17 national election. END SUMMARY.

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A Speech From The Throne  
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2. During his address, attended by the Ambassador and other members of the diplomatic corps, King Letsie III stated that the seventh Parliament will focus on implementing the country's "National Vision 2020 objectives" (NOTE: "National Vision 2020" is a set of long-term development strategies which Lesotho commits to achieving by the year 2020. END NOTE.) The King, who focused exclusively on domestic matters, indicated that Parliament will be expected to pass numerous bills into law during the coming session, including several constitutional amendments as well as legislation dealing with the Penal Code, judicial administration, child protection and welfare, the environment, national heritage, and anti-money laundering.

3. The King pointed out that the GOL will strive to attain the 7% growth rate which Lesotho requires in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. He added that the GOL will redouble its efforts in the fight against HIV/AIDS, to create employment opportunities by developing tourism and attracting foreign direct investment, to protect the environment, to improve agricultural productivity, to develop and improve roads, water, and electricity supply to villages and towns, to improve access to information and communication technology, and to improve the status of youth and women. He also thanked the nation for holding a peaceful national election, and wished the new parliament fruitful and constructive deliberations leading to the betterment of the lives of the Basotho people.

¶4. Preceding the royal address, 32 opposition parliamentarians were sworn-in (NOTE: These parliamentarians did not attend the official swearing-in ceremony on February 23rd with ruling party parliamentarians, stating that they were not officially informed of the proceedings. END NOTE.) Also, Sephiri Motanyane was re-elected as the Deputy Speaker of Parliament. He has previously held Cabinet portfolios as Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and as Minister of Law and Constitutional Affairs.

¶5. Several thousand political party members and supporters thronged the exterior of the Parliament during the opening ceremonies to support individual parties. The boisterous and vocal crowds chanted for hours, primarily in support of opposition parties, and could be heard inside Parliament during the King's address. The GOL's security presence was robust, and no incidents were reported.

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A Sit-In and An Ejection  
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¶6. Thomas Thabane, the leader of Lesotho's largest opposition party, the All Basotho Convention (ABC), took the floor shortly after the new Parliamentary session began to speak on behalf of the ABC, the Basotho National Party (BNP), the Lesotho Workers Party (LWP), the Alliance of Congress Parties (ACP), and the Marematlou Freedom Party (MFP).

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¶7. Thabane, who has publicly attacked the GOL and the Independent Electoral Commission for alleged electoral abuses and incorrect distribution of proportional seats, offered the opposition's full support of the leader of the National Independence Party (NIP) leader in a case the latter has filed at the High Court against the governing LCD party (NOTE: The elderly leader of the NIP claims that his party improperly entered into an alliance with the ruling LCD without his consent, and the Lesotho's High Court sided with him before it was overturned on appeal; ref A. END NOTE.) Thabane added that opposition parties also demand a review of the manner in which proportional seats were allocated following the February 17 election.

¶8. Thabane announced that opposition parties would stage a "sit-in" in Parliament commencing on Thursday, March 15. If the GOL does not respond to their grievances by Sunday March 18, Thabane said the opposition would encourage their supporters nationwide to embark on a work "stay-away" from Monday, March 19, to Wednesday, March 21.

¶9. The sit-in came to an end late in the evening on March 15 when members of the Lesotho Defense Forces (LDF) intervened, physically ejecting some of the MPs and moving them outside Parliament grounds. Prior to the arrival of the LDF, the Lesotho Mounted Police Service (LMPS) had negotiated with the MPs, trying to convince them to leave the Parliament grounds, citing an order from the Speaker of Parliament. These

negotiations were ongoing when the military entered the Parliament.

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The Political System Strains  
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¶10. COMMENT: The unity displayed by opposition parties in supporting the NIP leader, demanding redistribution of legislative seats, and calling for a work stoppage presents new challenges for the Government of Lesotho. The opposition MPs ejected from the Parliament building, as well some members of the public who called in to local radio programs, denounced the military action as illegal and a violation of parliamentary procedure and the immunity of MPs. This unfolding crisis reveals cracks in Lesotho's otherwise model Mixed-Member Proportional parliamentary system, but also indicates an evolution of the ABC's Thabane, who may be abandoning the court system and using more populist means to address his grievances.  
END COMMENT.  
PERRY